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Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Standing Committee on Social Programs

Report on the 2001-2002 Main Estimates

Chair: Mr. J. Michael Miltenberger

MEMBERS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROGRAMS

J. Michael Miltenberger
MLA Thebacha
Chair

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MLA Deh Cho
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MLA North Slave

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Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Standing Committee on Social Programs

February 15, 2001

THE HONOURABLE ANTHONY (TONY) WHITFORD, MLA
SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Social Programs has the honour of presenting its Report on the Review of the 2001-2002 Main Estimates, and commends it to the House.

J. Michael Miltenberger
Chair

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The Standing Committee on Social Programs Report on the Review of the 2001/2002 Main Estimates

General Comments

The Members of the Standing Committee noted that the reviews of the Business Plans and Main Estimates were not combined this fiscal year due to an election and that the business planning and budgetary cycle is back on track. The departmental staff worked especially hard to have the Business Plans and Main Estimates ready for Committee Review, so shortly after the last budget cycle. The Committee appreciates the extra effort.

Committee Members remain disappointed with the level of cooperation between the departments in the social program envelope. Members note that there has been some progress made in the Harmonization of the Income Support and Social Housing Programs and in the creation of the Early Childhood Development Action Plan. The real proof of how well the departments are cooperating will fall out from how the departments work together in implementing the strategies. The Standing Committee on Social Programs will be watching with interest how events unfold.

Other Expenses

The Standing Committee reviews the budgets of each department based on a breakdown by activity. In most departments, the activity breakdowns are small enough that Committee Members can get a very good sense of what is happening and how the budget is to be used. However, for example, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment has very few activities, despite having one of the largest departmental budgets in Government. As a result, large pools of money are merely identified as Other Expenses. Under Advanced Education and Careers, for example, the Department shows $24,692,000 for Other Expenses, an amount that is almost as much as the entire operational budget for the Financial Management Board Secretariat.

Not only were there large amounts listed under Other Expenses, but the Department was unable to quickly provide detailed information on what items were covered under those Other Expenses. Although the breakdown was subsequently provided, it was not in time to adequately be considered during the review of the Main Estimates.

The Accountability and Oversight Committee has previously recommended that a breakdown be provided of these Other Expenses.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs has requested that the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight provide the Government with another recommendation on including breakdowns on Other Expenses as an information item when presenting the Main Estimates.

Department of Health and Social Services

General

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 16, 2001 to review the 2001/2002 Main Estimates for the Department of Health and Social Services. The Members noted a $3,414,000 increase under Compensation and Benefits to cover the costs of the new collective agreement with the Union of Northern Workers and a further $4,895,000 in forced growth for such things as medical travel, immunization programs, hiring of the first ten social workers to meet the recommendations of the Child Welfare League of Canada Report, foster care, southern placements, and enhancing Independent Living Programs in the Deh Cho.

The Committee also noted a $5,500,000 reduction under Health Insurance Programs relating to the return of the responsibility for the Non-Insured Health Benefit Program to the federal government; a $54,000 reduction for Physician Programs and a $500,000 reduction relating to the inability of the Department to secure title to the former properties of the Northern Addiction Services.

Members had several concerns with the Department of Health and Social Services. These concerns were primarily in the ability of the Department to provide quality information and the Department's relationships with the Boards.

Signs of Difficulty

The Members of the Standing Committee expect departments to have clear plans based on blue-chip information, to be explicit in how they intend to implement those plans, and to report back on the results of changes and initiatives in a concise and informative way. For a number of years, the Department of Health and Social Services has been unable to provide quality information in both financial and program areas to the Standing and Special Committees of the Assembly.

Over the past two years, there has been a slight improvement in the development and reporting of some general statistical information on health. However, adequate information necessary to make accurate and informed decisions about programs and expenditures continues to be unavailable or of poor quality. The Department has consistently failed to demonstrate issues were in hand and that there was a comprehensive approach based on top quality data.

Two issues were raised during the Business Plan Review that, in the view of Committee Members, indicated that the Department remains in a perpetual planning phase, unable to move forward on the hard realities facing the health and social service system.

The first issue was a contract to review healthcare sustainability being sole sourced to a southern contractor with no tender process. The Committee sees this as essentialy a review of the governance system deciding which facets of the healthcare system the Boards or the Department control.

Members of the Standing Committee were concerned that not only was the contract for the review of healthcare sustainability sole sourced but that the chosen contractor was from outside the Northwest Territories. Members are always concerned when a contract of this size ($300,000) is awarded to a southern contractor. The concern is even greater when no other northern or southern contractors had the opportunity to participate in a competitive bidding process.

The results of the review on the sustainability of healthcare may now be in question because of the closed way in which the contractor was selected and the resulting speculation at the Board and other levels about why the decision was made. There is a concern that if the Department handpicked the contractor, they perhaps also handpicked the results of the review.

The Committee's second issue was the addition of two new senior manager positions, an associate deputy minister and an assistant deputy minister for Population Health and Clinical Services.

Members of the Committee noted that they had been pushing for the Department to increase its ability to monitor the clinical side of healthcare. It is hoped that the appointment of an assistant deputy minister for Population Health and Clinical Services is a first step in improving monitoring.

While the Department did attempt to explain the need for the two new senior management positions, no explanation was provided why this was not identified as a critical need in October during the Business Plan review. Yet, Members noted that the senior staff were appointed and in place by January.

The Department indicated there are emerging pressures on the system caused by the Board's deficits and that the Department is dissatisfied with the quality of information that they were able to provide over the last two years. It was also revealed that this led to the department being unable to provide the quality of advice, analysis and support necessary for decision-makers to make informed decisions. The Department said this contributes to a growing sense that the system is out of control and the Department believes there is little it could do to make the necessary changes to sustain the viability of the healthcare system in the absence of quality information.

Committee Members were told that the Department required short-term senior management help to oversee operational and payroll audits for Boards in difficulty, and to coordinate what is hoped to be the final review of the Healthcare system for quite some time.

The Standing Committee agrees with the Department that there are serious problems, both operationally and with the quality of information and resultant decision-making. There was a suggestion that the latest governance review and the addition of the two senior manager positions would make the difference. Committee Members sincerely hope this is the case and that the next Business Plan will see a Department which is proactively dealing with the important issues that are part of its mandate.

Now that there is a shared understanding of the challenges facing the Department and health and social services system, the Standing Committee is prepared to work with the Minister and Department to address the problems and improve the situation.

Board/Department Relationships

The Standing Committee is disturbed by the apparent animosity, distrust and disrespect that seem to characterize the relationships between the Department and the Health and Social Services Boards. In our opinion, this is having a significant negative impact on the health and social services system and on the ability of Boards to develop services for residents.

It is truly disappointing that the situation has reached its current low point. Particularly since two years ago, the Department created the Board Support and Health Services Division complete with a Director position, tasked with the specific role of improving the reporting and overall relationship between the Department and the Health and Social Services Boards.

The Committee does not believe that the difficulties are a necessary outcome of having Boards and a Department involved in the delivery of services. If we look at the school side of Education, Culture and Employment, the Boards are well established, in relatively good financial health, and maintain a cooperative working relationship with each other, the Department and the Minister. The joint recruiting drive for teachers this January is just one example of how this type of system can work.

Of particular concern is the financial status of most Health and Social Services Boards. Although we are close to the end of the current fiscal year, some Boards are still operating without budgets or deficit recovery plans approved by the Department. At a time when we are encouraging advance planning, these Boards are operating day to day. Fingers are being pointed in both directions with the Department suggesting they cannot get accurate information from the Boards to allow for decision-making and the Boards suggesting that the Department does not have the expertise to adequately support them, in either financial or operational matters.

It is critical for the effective functioning of our health and social services programs that a positive, cooperative relationship be established between the Department and the Boards. This will take considerable effort and leadership from the Department but is essential. The Members of the Standing Committee look forward to hearing from the Minister what steps the Department will take over the next six months to improve the quality of interaction with the Boards and create a mutually supportive and respectful relationship.

Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB)

The Standing Committee supports the general concept of returning responsibility for the NIHB program to the Federal government. However, that support comes with a number of concerns.

A smooth transition process from territorial administration to federal is important to those accessing the program. Members expect that a detailed transition plan has been developed to ensure continuity of service and would like to receive a copy of that plan by March 15, 2001.

Although responsibility for the program is being returned to the federal government, the Department of Health and Social Services continues to have a mandate to address the health concerns of all residents. This should include an advocacy role on behalf of residents with regard to the NIHB. In particular, the territorial government should monitor changes to the program and carry out the necessary lobbying to ensure that the needs of residents covered by NIHB continue to be met. This on-going monitoring and advocacy role should be specifically assigned within the Department.

Members are also concerned about the Metis Health Benefit. This program was developed, in part, to complement the NIHB programming available to those status individuals. The Committee would like a commitment that the return of the NIHB will not negatively impact on the level or delivery of the Metis Health Benefit.

Medical Travel Policy

The Committee appreciates that the Department and the relevant Boards have addressed the medical travel concerns of Kakisa residents and have instituted a plan that everyone agrees on. However, this does not address broader concerns with the Medical Travel Policy. Residents of small communities wonder why medical travel does not apply when someone travels on their own initiative for medical purposes or seeks a second opinion when dealing with a serious medical matter. The Medical Travel Policy, as it stands, does not address the inequities in access to medical services for those who happen to live in larger centres and for those residents of smaller communities who can only access a similar level of service at their own expense.

Committee Members recognize that these are complicated issues and that medical travel is a major cost driver within the health and social services system. However, from a perspective of fairness and equity, if a second opinion reveals additional information which aids in the effective treatment of an individual, the individual should be compensated for the personal expense they incurred to obtain that second opinion.

Members raised this issue during the June 2000 review of the 2000/2001 Main Estimates but, as of yet received no response from the Minister. The Committee requests a response by March 15, 2001.

Recruitment and Retention Issues

The Standing Committee has repeatedly requested specific, detailed information from the Department regarding the success of the various elements of the Recruitment and Retention Plan. The Department currently has a team of three full-time staff working at the headquarters level, exclusively on recruitment and retention issues. On October 27, 2000, the Standing Committee requested further information on the components of the Recruitment and Retention Plan. To date, no response has been received. Without this information, it is difficult for the Committee to determine whether the significant funding currently invested in this plan is having an impact, whether there are any more frontline health and social services workers, and whether the length of time they remain in their positions is increasing or staying the same.

Nursing

There are two areas of specific concern regarding nursing. The first is the issue of the nurses' supplement. This supplement is nearing its end and the Government will have to determine, once again, how to handle the issue of compensation for nurses.

Committee Members are unaware of any specific work being done to find a long-term solution to the issue beyond the stopgap use of the nurses' supplement. There is also a lack of clear information regarding the effectiveness of the supplement in both recruiting and retaining nurses. The Committee looks forward to information on how the Department plans to address nurses' compensation while acknowledging the impact of any such strategy on other occupations with similar recruitment pressures.

The second area of concern regarding nursing is the apparent lack of coordination in trying to recruit nurses. Committee Members have been told of instances where one Health and Social Services Board will attend a recruitment event, only to discover that other Boards are also there delivering a similar message. One of the elements of the Recruitment and Retention Plan was supposed to be coordination of these efforts between the Boards and the Department. The Committee would like to receive detailed information on what coordination takes place with the Boards on recruitment.

Strategic Initiative Fund

The Committee notes that the Strategic Initiative Fund has moved beyond its original purpose and is, by the Department's own admission, funding programs which should be included as part of the base funding to the Boards.
This becomes readily apparent upon examination of the information provided by the Department to the Committee on the programs that are being funded by the Strategic Initiative Fund this fiscal year.

While there may be some advantage to maintaining "some" discretionary funding that can be used to fund worthwhile projects, such a fund should not be utilized to pay for programs that should be part of the base. If a program funded under the Strategic Initiative Fund is ongoing (or has become institutionalized as part of the core services that the Board offers), the money to run the program should become part of the base funding to that particular Board.

Members were of the opinion that the Strategic Initiative Fund is being used to fund programming that could be considered part of core services that each Board is expected to offer. The original intent of the Strategic Initiative Fund was to help Boards fund additional programming over and above what they are required to.

Concern was expressed that the way the Strategic Initiative Fund is administered could be unfair to the smaller Boards. The larger Boards have the resources and personnel to develop and submit comprehensive proposals to access funding. The smaller Boards, because of their inability to develop proposals, may be systemically penalized in accessing funds.

Should the Strategic Initiative Fund be discontinued and the funding converted to part of the base, the Standing Committee on Social Programs will expect to see rationale presented that explains the fair and equitable distribution to the Boards.

Department of Education, Culture and Employment

General

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 17 and 18, 2001 to consider the 2001/2002 Main Estimates for the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

There were a number of changes in the Main Estimates from the figures provided during the Business Plan review in October; a $635,000 increase for the revised capital cost of the Helen Kalvik School in Holman Island; a $1,840,000 increase to address changes resulting from the collective agreement with the Union of Northern Workers; a $763,000 decrease in amortization expenses; a $4,535,000 increase for reductions in pupil/teacher ratios resulting from the NWT Teachers' Association agreement; and a $325,000 transfer from Health and Social Services to create a one-window approach to service for seniors and disabled persons.

Subsequent to the Minister's presentation on the Main Estimates, correspondence from the Chairman of the Financial Management Board indicated that there would be a further $335,000 provided to the Yellowknife School Districts and the Rae-Edzo School Society to cover costs associated with the signing of the new collective agreement with the Union of Northern Workers. The correspondence also stated that the $2 million previously identified for the Early Childhood Development Action Plan in the Main Estimates would become part of the Supplementary Reserve.

As part of the Business Plan review, the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight had made a recommendation on behalf of the Standing Committee on Social Programs regarding reinvestment of the projected $1 million savings in the Income Support Program. As a result of the recommendation the Department has reinvested $500,000 to enhance the food basket and $200,000 to improve services for disabled persons.

When questioned about the $300,000 shortfall from the recommendation, the Minister advised the Committee there would also be increased spending for the Literacy and Maximizing Northern Employment Strategies, which would bring the total reinvestment to at least the $1 million mark.

Committee Members are not sure that this will achieve the intended result of the recommendation for re-investment and will be watching the implementation of the enhancements to the Income Support Program to gauge their effect.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs would like to thank the Department and the Government for meeting at least part of the recommendation to reinvest the savings that were a result of the increased efficiencies to the Income Support Program. The Department is strongly urged to examine the Income Support Program on a regular basis to ensure that it is sufficient to maintain the dignity of income support clients and meet their basic needs.

Early Childhood Development Action Plan

After years of Committee recommendations to focus on prevention to better ensure healthy children, the Standing Committee is pleased that the Government is prepared to make a $2 million investment in early childhood development in each of the next three years. Now, Members are anxious to see the details of the program. The Committee looks forward to being able to comment on the proposed program when the Department, along with the Department of Health and Social Services, brings that information back to the Committee in April 2001.

Committee Members will be looking for a co-ordinated approach with existing programs and service providers. For example, Aboriginal organisations and governments have already been delivering Aboriginal Head Start Programs that have proven very effective in meeting early childhood development needs. Programming under the Action Plan should enhance, rather than compete with, such existing programs and services.

To date, there is little evidence that there is true co-ordination and co-operation between Education, Culture and Employment and Health and Social Services on the Action Plan. When the proposal is reviewed in April, the Committee hopes to see strong evidence that these two departments are finally working together toward a common goal, in measurable and tangible ways.

Members noted that the commitment to early childhood development is only for the next three years. It is hoped that the Government will be able to find funding to make early childhood development part of the base, as it will be difficult to wind up extremely important programs when the funding is sunsetted in three years. It was also noted that subsequent to reviewing the Main Estimates the $2.0 million was removed and placed in the Supplementary Reserve.

Student Financial Assistance Program (SFA)

The Members of the Standing Committee continue to have many concerns about the current delivery approach for the Student Financial Assistance Program.

During the review of the Main Estimates, the Minister indicated that the Department is moving $214,000 from the SFA program to pay for new SFA loans officer's salaries. There was no mention of the need for this transfer of funds from the program to salaries during the review of Business Plans just three months ago. What is particularly disturbing about this funding transfer is that that Minister insisted that the department could not afford the $300,000 in program funds to grandfather students at post-secondary institutions who were previously entitled to remissible SFA loans. The Minister then takes more than 2/3 of the amount necessary to grandfather these students and shifts it to pay for the increased administration costs of the revised SFA Program.

In light of the administrative funding transfer, the unwillingness of the Minister to grandfather students adversely affected by the change in the SFA Program continues to be an issue for the Committee. When Committee Members gave approval last year to the SFA redesign, it was with the understanding that students presently receiving benefits would be grandfathered. It is a concern that the Members cannot take the Minister at his word when he makes a commitment in order to get Committee support for a program change.

Members of the Committee remain concerned that the SFA Program continues to be entrenched at headquarters. There is a strong interest in seeing this program delivered regionally or locally, like other similar programs. This decentralization would be a good first step. The Student Financial Assistance Program will probably be part of self-government agreements and any eventual transfer would be the responsibility of the regional administration.

While the Department has made efforts over the past few years to improve the delivery of SFA, there is still room for improvement. It was noted that Members from the larger communities spend far more time dealing with complaints about the SFA Program than with the Income Support Program. The Committee will be monitoring the fall intake of students and hopes the system will run considerably smoother than it did last year.

The Committee and Minister discussed the benefit of introducing an interest reduction/relief plan for those students who return to the Northwest Territories and have paid back the principal of their student loans. This would be an excellent way to encourage students to return to the North once they complete their studies. It would also be consistent with the approach announced under the Maximizing Northern Employment Strategy. The Committee was pleased to hear that the Department is considering a similar proposal and looks forward to further discussion in the near future.

Oil and Gas Training

The Government has provided Members with information demonstrating the significant employment opportunities, both short and long-term, in the oil and gas sector. Less than a year ago, there were announcements about the efforts to support oil and gas training and government officials were heavily involved in plans to support this effort.

The Standing Committee was pleased that $500,000 was identified in the Business Plan for oil and gas training but is disappointed that more could not be made available. The money identified thus far has been allocated for entry-level courses.

The safety and truck driving courses may meet immediate needs of employers, but, they do not ensure that Northerners are trained and ready to advance past the entry-level positions or to assume the technical jobs available after the initial exploration work is done.

Officials from oil and gas exploration companies have told Committee Members that there is a need for more extensive training than what is currently available. It is important that the Department take a leadership role in determining those training needs and finding ways to help northerners prepare for more than just entry-level jobs.

While we can look to partners such as businesses and the Aboriginal Governments to complement the training offered or coordinated by the government, the government has the responsibility to ensure that residents have the skills that employers need through programs and institutions such as Aurora College and the Apprenticeship program. The creation of an Oil and Gas Sector Committee similar to the very successful Mine Training Committee may be one way to bring all partners together to address training issues.

Oil and gas development may come and go in a relatively short period of time. The Committee is apprehensive about having further efforts to support northern employment and training in oil and gas contingent on Federal funding that may take a long time to materialize. The Department must monitor this situation and the Government must be prepared to invest in the future of the people of the Northwest Territories should the Federal Government fail to recognize our potential.

Impact Benefit Agreements (IBA)

Some Members of the Standing Committee are concerned about the treatment of Impact Benefit Agreement payments in assessing income support amounts. Currently, income support clients have their income support reduced by the amount they receive under an IBA.

There are two areas where greater clarity is required. First, it is not clear whether an IBA payment is similar to a Treaty Payment and whether either type of payment should result in reductions to payments received under other government programs.

Second, IBA payments are almost like a windfall for those on income support. Under normal circumstances, these individuals have no opportunity to buy extra items like a nice pair of runners for their children or to put a small amount of money away for their future. The IBA provides that opportunity, but it is then taken away because their income support payments are reduced and they need to use the IBA payment to meet the necessities of life.

Members are pleased that the Department will revisit this issue and look forward to discussions with the Minister in late spring on possible options for dealing with this issue.

Consistency in College Programs

Members are aware of students who have quit jobs to attend Aurora College only to have courses cancelled at the last minute due to insufficient enrolment. While the Committee understands the economics behind these cancellation decisions, there is still an obligation on the part of the College to deliver the programs it says it is going to. If the College wants to be treated as a full-grown college, on par with its southern counterparts, it must find ways to ensure that students have full access to the range of courses initially advertised. Students should not have to take courses that are of no interest or value to them in order to get their diplomas on a timely basis.

Distance education is being used more frequently in the high schools to provide choices and options for students. The College needs to take a hard look at how to access distance education options so students are treated fairly and receive the quality and variety of education that they require. If the College cannot offer a course because of low enrolment, there should be a distance education opportunity for the student to take the course.

An important part of this equation is how the SFA Program will support students pursuing distance education opportunities. The Committee is still waiting for information on how the Department plans to deal with this growing issue.

Members would like to stress that Aurora College students should not have their SFA funding threatened if they are required to take distance education programs to fulfil credit requirements that the College is unable to provide.

2000 Student Support Needs Assessment Territorial Report

For a number of years, teachers and healthcare providers have stated that there are large numbers of FAS/FAE youth in our schools. Members have regularly heard about the extra student support and teacher time that is required to work with these children to help them achieve their full potential. It was surprising, therefore, that the report on student support needs did not mention FAS/FAE. The Committee Members are aware that clinical diagnosis is necessary to make a final determination of FAS/FAE and teachers are not trained to make that diagnosis. However, to omit this particular disability in the report suggests that there are gaps in the assessment and reduces the value of the report as a planning document.

The Department did provide information on FAS/FAE students in the classroom after the Committee raised its concern. However, this does not address the fundamental flaw in the report when it omits this prevalent issue and possibly others as well.

Other School Funding

Committee Members note that there is a discrepancy in how funding for schools outside the normal school system is allocated. For example, the Western Arctic Leadership Program is funded through negotiation while the Koinonia School is funded on enrolment. As with all government programs, there is a need for consistency in how similar organizations access government funding.

Maximising Northern Employment

While funds for the Maximising Northern Employment Strategy are not included in the 2001/2002 Main Estimates, the Premier did highlight components of the strategy in his recent address and Committee Members are under the understanding that it will be implemented in the 2001/2002 fiscal year. With the understanding that the Premier and Cabinet hope to implement parts of this strategy within weeks, the Standing Committee saw the opportunity to make any comments were extremely limited. Consequently, Members believed that it was important to include our initial comments on the Maximising Northern Employment Strategy in this report.

At this point, the Maximising Northern Employment Strategy is a vaguely defined plan with good intentions but very little in terms of substantive detail, definitive implementation plans or clear budgets. Committee Members are generally supportive of the thrust of the strategy, but disappointed that the Government has chosen to pursue this significant strategy with no opportunity for the Committee to comment before the Premier made components of the Strategy public. This means there was no chance to discuss linkages with other initiatives that might have had an equal impact on northern employment.

For example, Committee Members see the Student North Apprenticeship Program (SNAP) as a very valuable program and have consistently encouraged its expansion. This program allows students to attend high school part-time while working towards their first-year apprenticeship in a recognized trade during the other half of the school day. The SNAP program seems to be a good fit with the announcement about program changes to allow students to pursue other paths in high school beyond a strictly academic education. When the details of the strategy are announced, the Committee expects to see clear linkages to SNAP.

Members are aware that some math programs offered in our high schools do not provide sufficient background in math for a student to pass a pre-trades qualification exam. If you can't pass this exam you usually can't get an apprenticeship. The Standing Committee hopes that the program changes the Premier spoke of will include upgrading the math curriculum to meet trades entry requirements.

Another element that Members hope to see addressed is a better understanding among students of the program entry requirements for all forms of post-secondary education and training, from university to college to trades to specific technical and specialized training. Without this information, students may not enroll in the necessary high school courses.

Members are interested in the links between the employment training programs and how high school students will be supported and tracked through their post-secondary education and subsequently encouraged to become part of the northern workforce.

Many of the emerging job opportunities in the non-renewable resource sector involve heavy equipment operation. Although the Government says preparing Northerners is a priority, there is a lack of a corresponding commitment to the Heavy Equipment Operators Program at the Thebacha Campus. As a result of budget cuts, this program has to train operators on equipment that is often no longer in use by industry.

The Government must work on partnerships with employers and Aboriginal governments to design a heavy-duty operator's course that meets their needs. There is also a need to consult with employers to determine and acquire the necessary equipment for the Fort Smith Campus to produce employable heavy-equipment operators. It is hoped the Maximizing Northern Employment Strategy will acknowledge this need.

The Department's Main Estimates talked about an increased emphasis on apprenticeship training but there is no new funding and no evidence that the programming will change. The need for tradespersons is great in the non-renewable resource sector and the Government should be making a strong financial commitment to address that need.

The Committee is interested in the plan to offer term positions to every post-secondary graduate in priority occupations. Given that it is less than three months away from the end of the post-secondary school year, Members would like to see the program implementation details, including how priority occupations will be defined. Committee Members also expect consultation with the Union of Northern Workers will be necessary to determine how this program relates to the collective agreement.

Committee Members are very anxious to engage in the detailed review of the strategy with the Minister quickly so there is time for the Committee to provide advice prior to implementation.

Department of Justice

General

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 19, 2001 to consider the 2001/2002 Main Estimates for the Department of Justice.

There were a number of increases over the previous year's budget including $1,781,000 to cover additional expenses arising from the collective agreement signed with the Union of Northern Workers; an increase of $1,060,000 to cover the budget shortfall caused by the lower than anticipated number of Nunavut prisoners; $74,000 in forced growth for utility costs at the Yellowknife Correctional Centre; and $2,727,000 to cover costs associated with young offender facilities opening in the upcoming fiscal year.

Wilderness Camps

The Standing Committee has consistently expressed support for the Wilderness Camp Program. The Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs appreciate being provided with copies of the Final Report on the Cost Analysis of the Corrections Wilderness Camp Program. While there are concerns with some of the conclusions in the report, Members believe the report will allow discussion to take place to revise and improve the Wilderness Camp Program.

The Committee looks forward to the promised briefing from the Department of Justice and an opportunity to provide input before final decisions are made about changes to the Wilderness Camp Program.

Human Rights Legislation

In early 2000, when the Department of Justice first announced its intentions to develop human rights legislation, the Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs began asking questions about the extent of public consultation that would take place on this very important territorial legislation. During the October review of the Department's Business Plan, additional questions were raised when no consultation plan was available and no dollars were identified to support appropriate consultation on the draft *Human Rights Act*.

As was noted at that time, other departments undertaking major legislative initiatives usually provide detailed information on cost and a consultation process. The Department of Justice has not done this with human rights legislation.

The Committee is still waiting for details on what public consultation process the Department of Justice plans to undertake for the draft human rights legislation. In the absence of a clear consultation plan, the Standing Committee would like to suggest that, as a minimum, the Department make an effort to consult with all aboriginal governments and organizations, all municipal governments and all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are territorial in nature. This would include those NGOs that are not headquartered in Yellowknife.

Members are concerned that the Department will not make a substantive effort to be proactive in the consultation process. This could lead to problems when the bill comes forward that could have been dealt with during the consultation phase.

Members of the Standing Committee would like to receive a briefing prior to mid-March on how consultation will be carried out for the draft human rights legislation and how the Department plans to ensure residents and organizations in smaller NWT communities have a chance to participate in this important process.

Aboriginal Policing

The Committee supports the Department in its efforts to build a police force which is representative of the people it serves in the Northwest Territories and sees First Nations policing as an important part of that effort. In discussions with the Committee, the Minister talked about negotiations with the Solicitor General of Canada to increase funding to this program. The Main Estimates support this by mentioning "cost-sharing programs with the Solicitor General of Canada with respect to First Nations policing in support of aboriginal participation of the policing in their communities."

However, in examining the budget for the Law Enforcement Activity, Committee Members note that the Department has actually decreased the funding support for First Nations policing by $34,000 this fiscal year and $199,000 last year. Some Committee Members think the Department should "put its money where its mouth is" by increasing funding in this area. We also question whether the Solicitor General will seriously consider negotiating an increase while the NWT Department of Justice is cutting its own contribution to First Nations policing.

Legal Aid

For the past year, Committee Members have raised concerns about the effectiveness of legal aid, based on comments from constituents and reinforced by media reporting of difficulties with the system. In particular, since the major cuts to legal aid in 1996, Committee Members from smaller communities have noted a continual scaling back of the services provided by Legal Services Board lawyers and courtworkers.

In June 2000, the Department provided information showing a significant backlog of family law cases waiting for assistance under legal aid. After that meeting and before the October discussions on the 2001/2004 Business Plans, the Legal Services Board hired two staff lawyers, in part to deal with the backlog situation.

When this was identified during the Business Plan review, it raised questions for the Members. It was not clear how the Legal Services Board, without any other approvals, had the ability to finance from within and hire additional staff. Another question was why the backlog became an issue when the Board had the ability to take action by hiring additional staff as needed.

From discussions that occurred during the Review of the 2001/2002 Main Estimates in January 2001, it appears the Committee's concerns were well founded. Members heard that the Legal Services Board had already run out of money for the 2000/20001 fiscal year and had scaled back on the level of assistance its lawyers and courtworkers were providing. Members were also warned to expect a deficit for the Legal Services Board.

This lack of operational and financial planning calls into question the viability of the Legal Services Board as it now exists. While the backlog was cleaned up on a temporary basis, Members are concerned about the long-term impacts of the decision to hire two new staff lawyers as services are scaled back to deal with the financial shortfall.

It has become apparent to Committee Members that it is time to examine how legal aid is delivered in the Northwest Territories. Members are very concerned that a sustainable legal aid system is not possible given the current funding level and delivery mechanisms.

The Standing Committee will conduct its own research on the methods of Legal Aid delivery in Canada and will contact the Minister at a later date with some possible recommendations.

Victims' Assistance Program

There is a dedicated group of volunteers in Yellowknife and some of the other larger communities who provide assistance to the victims of crime. However, this support mechanism does not exist in the majority of our communities.

Members of the Committee believe that Government is not supporting victims of crime in most NWT communities. Committee Members are aware of several cases where the victim of a crime refused to testify because he or she was afraid of their attacker or did not understand the court process. This adds to the cost of our justice system, with police, lawyers and judges dedicating time to getting a trial underway, only to have the case collapse without the victim's testimony. In some cases, all that is required is someone to support the victim and guide them through what can be a confusing and traumatic experience.

Members are aware that community wellness groups have raised this concern. The Committee looks forward to a response from the Department by April 1, 2001, indicating how it will respond to the need for better assistance for the victims of crime.

Northwest Territories Housing Corporation

General

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 23, 2001 to consider the 2001/2002 Main Estimates for the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation.

The Main Estimates showed an increase of $446,000.00 from the amount presented in the Business Plans. This difference was to address the changes to the collective agreement with the Union of Northern Workers.

Federal Government Issues

Two issues, dealing with the Federal Government's limited support for northern housing issues were of concern to Committee Members. The first was the Federal On-Reserve Housing Program. Members of the Standing Committee are disappointed that the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation are not prepared to live up to their fiduciary responsibility for on-reserve housing in the Northwest Territories.

The Members are disappointed in the apparent lack of effort by the Housing Corporation to lobby federal counterparts to ensure that the Northwest Territories receives a fair share of housing funding that targets aboriginal people, such as the On-Reserve Housing Program.

The Standing Committee in last year's Main Estimate Report recommended that the Corporation continue lobbying the federal government to access the On-Reserve Housing Program. It is apparent that the Minister ignored this recommendation.

In addition, Committee Members are aware that the Minister made a commitment to the leadership of the Hay River Reserve to lobby on their behalf to access the On-Reserve Housing Program. Members are not pleased that the Minister also ignored this commitment.

It is clear from the actions of the federal government that there is no understanding of how different the Northwest Territories is from the rest of Canada where many aboriginal people live on reserves. Although northern aboriginal people do not, for the most part, live on reserves, they should have the same right to the funding and programs as those people living on southern reserves.

The second issue of concern to the Members of the Standing Committee was the possibility of increased funding for the building of social housing. It was disappointing to hear that our initial optimism about a federal proposal was misplaced. While there was a proposal made at the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Housing meeting, we understand that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation application process and conditions are so onerous that acceptance of the federal funding was not an option for the provincial and territorial governments.

The Committee would like to see the Minister lobby the federal government concerning the On-Reserve Housing Program and the need for a realistic funding program to build social housing. We look forward to receiving copies of the Minister's correspondence in pursuing these matters.

Business Development Activities

In recent years, the NWT Housing Corporation has been successful in marketing NWT goods and services and its expertise in the design, construction and operation of northern homes. There was a proposal to shift responsibility for this marketing to the NWT Development Corporation but the transfer appears to be on hold.

The Standing Committee is in favour of approaching any such transfer with care and caution. The Housing Corporation has done an excellent job in developing new markets for its goods and services. This has included creating positive business relationships and a level of trust between the Housing Corporation, as a supplier/contractor, with its business clients. The Housing Corporation also has access to in-house expertise, corporate history and knowledge that an outside marketing agency could not readily duplicate.

Members applaud the success of the Housing Corporation in this area and would like an opportunity to comment in advance on any proposed changes to the current marketing approach.

Harmonization of Income Support and Public Housing Programs

Members appreciated the briefing on the Harmonization of the Income Support and Social Housing Programs. If the harmonization can be implemented with appropriate review and analysis in advance to iron out potential problems, the inequities between the two programs should disappear. While the change is not supposed to impact those on income support, it should remove the disincentive for people to work. Persons employed in low-paying or part-time jobs will now not face a penalty for trying to earn income.

The proposed changes will result in rent increases for a number of people, including seniors, who occupy social housing and have significant sources of income. Any changes must be carefully communicated as affected people will need time to make the necessary adjustments to their personal financial arrangements.

Members noted in their last briefing that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation had not developed a communication strategy for the Harmonization Strategy. The Standing Committee expects to be provided with this at the next briefing on the Harmonization Strategy.